

'...how can you tell me who I am?'

▼ Stacy Schultz, UNL alumna ▼

LIFESTYLE from page 8

-lic high school did she find the name "lesbian."
 At that point, she told herself, "This is who I am," she said.
 Without a gay contact to answer questions, she spent hours researching gay lifestyles and issues in books. Somewhere in those pages, she lost her loneliness.
 That year, she told a few high school friends she was gay, and they guarded her secret at school.
 But she couldn't justify lying about her lifestyle to her parents, she said.
 So before her 18th birthday, Schultz told them.
 "My mom flipped out and said, 'I don't want anyone going to hell under my roof.'"
 Then her dad threatened, "If you kick her out of the house, I'm going with her."
 Schultz rattled off her dad's next words, and the re-enactment seemed to calm her.
 "He said, 'She's our daughter.'" She paused. "I love her."
 Though her father's support helped, Schultz drank heavily for two years to cope with the identity she felt made her an outcast.
 She started to drink alone and to feel constantly sick from her habit. One night, after an Alcoholics Anonymous commercial aired on television, she threw all her liquor away.
 "That was it. I was done with it," she said. She needed to move on in her life.
 Released from the haze of alcohol, she began struggling to balance a lesbian lifestyle with her fundamentalist faith.

"It's kind of like being a mixed child ... trying to be gay and Christian," she said.
 "I don't know what I'd do without God," she said, but she cannot squelch her life as a lesbian.
 And the churches tell her, "You've got these brown-colored eyes, but don't you dare look through them," she said. "You've got these arms, but don't you dare use them."
 Talking faster, she said she gets angriest when people tell her she can choose to stop being gay.
 "Why would anyone in their right mind choose to be this way in a society that steps on them?" she said.
 Schultz wants those she left behind in Seward to understand that being gay is not a choice, and that gay people live and work successfully in the community.
 She wants to tell her church, and she wants to tell her grandmother.
 She sometimes daydreams of entering "a big gay float" in Seward's Fourth of July parade and ending its charade as "the white-bread community."
 But, she said, "I don't know if we'd make it through the parade route."

Jeff's story

Those interviewed said the "white-bread" communities of Nebraska significantly shape many gay students' visions of themselves in society.
 For Jeff Krotz, a UNL junior, the community was Grand Island.
 The community has become more accepting since he left, he said, but he endured a lot in high school.
 Although he was well liked, his short stature and feminine voice placed him at the brunt of many



jokes.
 He admits he looked strange for a Midwestern boy; he wore Madonna T-shirts and was a visible AIDS activist.
 As a result, some students would only talk to him outside of school. Others responded by saying "fag" as he walked down the hallways.
 Four daring boys marched to his desk and asked him "Are you gay?"
 And, though he tried not to care what others thought, the heckling took its toll.
 By his junior year in high school, he sometimes stayed home from school to escape the harassment.
 He tried dating a girl for six months, in a last attempt to fit in and stop the demeaning comments.
 But "it didn't ever feel right," he said.
 Having a crush on his male baby sitter when he was in second grade felt more natural, Krotz said.
 "I thought we could get married and have kids," and he remembers happily telling his mother.
 In his youth, Krotz never felt ashamed of his gay feelings, he said, until his family watched a TV movie about a gay son's battle for his parents' acceptance.
 Krotz, still in elementary school, asked his stepfather, "Why are they being so mean to the son?"
 "They're doing something I could never accept one of my sons doing," his stepfather said.
 Krotz still managed to tell his stepfather he was gay before his parents divorced during his senior year in high school.
 And as his stepfather left, he spoke of Krotz: "He's just a fag."
 Krotz heard the hateful words, but he never heard an apology.
 But Krotz's mother never stopped supporting him, he said.
 Lately, she's become almost enthusiastic. She tells family members Krotz is gay - some he said he would never tell himself.
 She also works in a window coverings store, where she tells gay clients, "You know, my son is gay," just to break the subject.
 Krotz laughed and shook his head in a silent, "Can you believe my mother?"
 But her support has been priceless, he said.
 In January, for the first time, his stepfather joined in that support.
 Without an occasion, he called Krotz to talk about his actions four years before.
 He said he was wrong, and he said he was sorry.
 Then he promised to accept Krotz - including his lifestyle.



PHOTOS BY SAUNDERS/DN
TOP: KNUDSEN and SCHULTZ relax after a long day of work and classes. Schultz, who works the second shift at her night job, and Knudsen often don't end their day until well after 1 a.m.
MIDDLE: KNUDSEN, president of the Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender Resource Center, gets everything ready for the center's information booth in the union. Knudsen and other volunteers staffed the booth for three days during National Coming Out Week.
BOTTOM: KNUDSEN FIELDS questions from a television news station Wednesday afternoon in the Nebraska Union. Knudsen was responding to the recent controversy over sidewalk chalk writings.

Many high school teachers opened their lives to helping gay students before he left, he said. And the community more readily accepts gay students now.
 No one should come out whose life or livelihood would be endangered, he said.
 But every new person who can come out will further improve the environment-for-other gays, he said.
 "I think it's one of the greatest things in the world, to be able to show who you are," he said.
 Gay students aren't looking for understanding - only enough acceptance to live their lives without pretending, he said.
 "If you're not gay, how can you tell me who I am?" Schultz said, adding she will never ask a straight person to understand.
 But she will ask they learn the word "gay" signifies an entire culture of people, not only a type of sex.
 Ignorance of gay communities fuels the hate and violence that plague them nationwide, Schultz said.
 Gay individuals endure many hardships when they choose to accept their sexuality, including the ridicule of small-town classmates, parents' rejection and the despair that follows the "outcast" label. Those who sacrifice will not let hatred scare them back into the closet, she said.
 "We owe it to ourselves" to stay out, Knudsen said. "It's time to be happy."

A continuing struggle

Krotz said he likes to think he made a difference in Grand Island.

Resources and discussion groups for gay, lesbians, bisexuals or transgendered people and their friends and families.

University resources:

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender Resource Center:
 The center, in Nebraska Union Room 234, provides a safe, informal gathering place for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people.
 The center includes information on community services and events, current periodicals and a collection of GLBT books, and is staffed by an educational and social student organization supportive of the campus' gay community.
 Check the center's Web site at <http://www.unl.edu/lambda> for information.

Lesbian, Bisexual and Questioning Discussion Group:

A safe place for lesbians, bisexual women and those questioning their orientations to learn and share experiences in an informal atmosphere. The group meets Thursdays in the Nebraska Union. Call the Women's Center at 472-2597.

Gay Men's Support Group:

A confidential discussion group meeting Wednesdays. Call Luis Diaz-Perdomo at 472-7540 or the Rev. Phil Owen at 472-0355.

UNL Committee for Gay and Lesbian Concerns:

The committee serves as a forum for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered concerns at UNL. Call Pat Tetreault, 472-7447.

Local and national resources:

PFLAG - Lincoln Chapter:

Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays is a national organization of both gay and straight people, established mainly to support the family members of gay people. The 17-year-old Lincoln chapter is one of the nation's largest and meets on the fourth Tuesday of every month.

The group keeps a library of gay and lesbian resource material and can refer those seeking counseling to gay-friendly therapists in the Lincoln area.

All PFLAG members remain confidential, as do callers to its help and information line at 434-9880.

Lincoln Pride Network:

For a schedule of gay and lesbian events in Lincoln, call the confidential PFLAG help line at 434-9880.

Books and resources:

UNL's Love Library offers a significant resource material of gay and lesbian issues. The Lincoln Public Library also is increasing its holdings in this area.

The Nebraska Bookstore and Barnes and Noble Booksellers in Lincoln also keep significant sections of books on gay and lesbian issues.